

## **Keep Your Heart Steady by Luddleston**

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**Summary:**

It has been a year since Automedon returned from Troy. Everyone he has ever loved is dead and he scarcely knows why he, of all people, survived.

He finds unlikely companionship in Peleus, the only other person who is mourning all of them the same way Automedon is: as family.

## Keep Your Heart Steady

### Author's Note:

it must be a blue moon because i'm writing something SEVERELY ANGSTY. sometimes i just wonder what my habit of shipping automedon with everybody does to him once the war is over. And it's no good.

Everyone Automedon had ever loved is dead.

A year ago, this thought disturbed his every moment, waking and sleeping. When he first returned to the shores of his homeland, his heart felt so heavy he sometimes could not move. In the rare moments he forgot his massive grief, he would look around for somebody at his side, find that there was nobody left, and wish he, too, had been buried with his lovers.

All the other men went back home to families, lovers, parents, and were welcomed as heroes. Automedon, despite all the accolades he himself had earned and his new position in the royal household, felt singularly alone.

It becomes easier to think of them as time passes.

Patroclus had been the first he lost. The one *they* lost, all of them, together. Automedon had seen him go down, the blinding light of Apollo striking the battlefield and splitting Patroclus' armor off his body. Hektor's spear in Patroclus' gut a second later. The strange paleness of Hektor's face after Patroclus spoke dying words Automedon didn't get to hear. Hektor had killed hundreds, and yet Patroclus got to him.

Automedon leapt from the chariot and fought with a fury that should have gotten him killed, too. It was the horses, of all things, who saved him. When he tried to get back in and drive them toward more enemies—Automedon would take on the whole army for Patroclus, who was vicious in a fight but always so gentle with him—Peleus' divine steeds disobeyed him and turned to run away.

It took hours for him to get back to the camp. Xanthus and Balias ran to a wooded area far from the battlefield but not far enough to keep it out of earshot. Automedon stumbled out of the chariot and collapsed in his grief, he doesn't know for how long, and the horses cried with him, lowering their heads and letting him clutch at them and weep until he had no more breath.

By the time he returned to the camp, Antilochus had been told, and he'd told Achilles. Automedon heard snatches of what Achilles did when he learned. Antilochus was still holding him when Automedon came. If he let go, he said, they would lose Achilles too.

In some way, they did lose Achilles too, that day.

Achilles wouldn't eat, wouldn't sleep. He kept Patroclus' body by his side at all times, wouldn't let him go. Automedon and Antilochus had one another, sitting just outside Achilles' room and discussing in hushed tones what to do about Achilles, like they were deciding what to do with a dog that had gone wild.

Achilles was worse than a mad dog.

If he had been a terror in battle, he was even more so now. All mercy he'd possessed was gone. He fought like a god, that is, with no concern for mortal life. It took the river Skamandros himself rising up to take Achilles down, and even then, Poseidon drew him from the water and Haphaestus set the riverbanks ablaze. The gods would not let Achilles die.

Achilles was allowed revenge. Zeus weighed the scales, and Hektor of Troy came out on the losing side. Automedon does not think of what happened to Hektor after.

Things lightened for a while after they buried Patroclus. Antilochus could make Achilles smile, could make him eat. Automedon couldn't make him do anything—Achilles was too quick to notice that Automedon flinched when he touched him. Phoenix disappeared almost entirely, his grief over Patroclus manifesting in a great desire to be left alone to mourn.

Even though he was functional, Achilles was not human. It was as if the soul had gone out of him. It took him two weeks to be convinced to return Hektor's body. In the meantime the corpse was treated with the utmost disrespect.

*This will not bring Patroclus back,* Automedon wanted to tell him.

But Achilles delighted in this unnatural viciousness. He had never seemed so much like a god. It took his own goddess mother pleading with him to convince him to relinquish the body to Priam, who came in supplication, on his knees before this man who looked already dead, a shell of himself.

It was worse after Antilochus died.

Automedon wasn't near enough to see him fall. But he was there when Achilles found out.

Nestor and Thrasymedes came to the Myrmidons to ask Achilles to get Antilochus' body back. Memnon, who had killed him, was too strong. Achilles almost cut Thrasymedes' throat. Thrasymedes wasn't aware that you had to keep clear of Achilles, now, because he would kill an enemy as soon as an ally.

Achilles ran, as soon as they told him where he could find Memnon. By the time Automedon reached him, Achilles had been successful.

There were dozens of Trojans slaughtered and Achilles was in the middle of the mass, the only thing still breathing for yards around him. At first, Automedon thought Achilles was once again so bloodied it was impossible to recognize his golden head. Then, he realized Achilles had cut his hair.

*"I will not cut it, as long as the war lasts. Not until I come home to you."*  
This was what Achilles told his father before they left Phthia.

He had cut a lock of it for Patroclus' pyre.

Now all of it was short, just below his chin, lying on the ground in sad tangles near where Achilles was bowed over what Automedon assumed was

Antilochus' body. He was not crying. He was not screaming. He was barely even breathing, except the exertion of killing so many men forced air in his lungs.

As soon as Automedon approached he lifted up, his unnatural speed in full array, and whirled around, throwing a spear that very narrowly missed Automedon's head.

Sometimes he wishes Achilles hit him. It's selfish. It would have only heaped more grief on Achilles.

In the days after Antilochus' death, Achilles went between two modes of being: wild rage, and catatonic coldness. He was refusing to eat again, but it was less out of need to get back on the battlefield with immediacy, and more because he wanted to stop living.

And Automedon...

Automedon gave up.

To this day, he doesn't know how Achilles survived as long as he did. Automedon recruited the help of Alkimos, another of Achilles' companions, but there was little they could do for a man who would not speak, would not even move. He shook when they touched him, so they had to stop touching him. Sometimes, Automedon thought he was dead until he got up, picked up his spear, and ruined another entire battalion of Trojan soldiers.

Automedon wanted to scream at him, sometimes.

*"I'm still here! Don't you see me? Don't you love me? Why am I not enough to keep you alive?"*

Automedon wished he'd never met Achilles, sometimes.

He did not see Achilles die. He only knew it had happened because of Phoenix—dear Phoenix, the man was like a father to Achilles and Patroclus, he had no children of his own and he had to watch these two die. After, Phoenix was still recalcitrant, but kept moving stonily, taking up

where Achilles had fallen. Automedon wanted to collapse into Phoenix's arms, find comfort where he once had as a much younger man, but he couldn't. He had to pick himself up, keep going, follow orders. They buried all three of them together: Achilles, Patroclus, and Antilochus.

It was a fucking *relief* to see Achilles' body turn to ash.

Automedon still hates that he felt that way. He should have done more. He knows he couldn't have.

The end of the war passed in a bloody blur.

Automedon can't look at Pyrrhus. He was never able to. The boy looks too much like his father.

On their way home, he finally let himself give into the urge to beg Phoenix for comfort.

Phoenix had not been his first lover, but he'd been his first love. He was a good twenty years older, and Automedon fell for him fast, hard, and completely. It had been long before news of war brewing with Troy had even reached Phthia, back when Achilles and Patroclus were off on the mountain with Chiron. He'd slept with Phoenix, but when he wanted more, he had found out that Phoenix had spent his whole life madly in love with his king, and Peleus had no idea.

His first heartbreak, the simplicity of finding out that the man he loved was in love with somebody else. Looking back, it had been so *easy*. So painless, by comparison. He'd cried for hours, back then. It seems sweet now.

Phoenix was still injured from one of their final battles, and it wasn't healing right. He got weaker. Automedon laid with his head on his chest and tried to focus on his heartbeat, giving little childish, shuddering sobs. Phoenix held him, and Automedon wasn't sure if he was awake or asleep. Or unconscious.

"You can't leave me, too," he said, pleading and shaking. "You can't leave me too."

"I won't," Phoenix promised him. "I told Peleus I would come back to him. And I won't leave you, my dear. I will come home to Phthia with you and we will drown our sorrows together."

"Swear it to me."

"I swear. I will never leave you. After this long, I have to go home. Just get me home, we'll be okay."

Automedon knew a day later that this promise would be broken.

He had seen men succumb to infection before, he knew what the signs looked like. He gave bitter prayers and sacrifices to Apollo, the very god who had gotten Patroclus killed, who had let Achilles die wracked with poison in his temple.

His intercessions were not obliged.

Maybe if they had been able to make their way back by sea, maybe if the journey wasn't going to take months, they would have been able to get proper care for him. Or maybe they would just end up on a boat with a dying man instead of on the road with a dying man.

"He's slowing us down," Pyrrhus said.

Automedon wanted to slap him.

He was right, though.

In his last moments, Phoenix was the one who said, "promise me you won't leave me."

Automedon couldn't reply for a very long time. It hadn't been since Patroclus' death that he'd cried this way, tears so great he couldn't choke out a single word. Phoenix was already gone by the time he said, "I won't."

He remembers feeling hollowed out, after that. He remembers wanting to pull Pyrrhus by his hair and tell him... tell him that they needed to *stop*. He

wanted to sit in his grief. But they had to keep moving. And he still couldn't touch that shitty little brat, because his hair is like his father's.

Someday, he will be able to think only of the good times. Phoenix giving him that warm smile and asked *aren't you a little young?* in a way that said he didn't really think so. The look of utter shock Patroclus gave him when he first saw Automedon walk right up to Peleus' wild immortal horses and pet them on their noses. Achilles turning a sparring match into flirting, putting Automedon on his back and telling him he looked nice down there. Antilochus sneaking away from his father's camp to the Myrmidons', climbing into bed beside them.

And the ways they loved each other! Achilles and Patroclus calling one another 'beloved' so often even Odysseus rolled his eyes (and they all knew Odysseus was secretly a romantic). Antilochus sitting beside Automedon in the stable and asking him to tell his story. Phoenix promising he was going to tell Peleus all the shitty things Achilles and Patroclus did while they were away from home.

Someday, he will think of the good times. But for now, when he sits awake in the nights, it is only easy to remember how he lost them, and how he watched them lose each other.

He is sitting in his bedroom—this is not the bedroom he used to have but he has slept here before, because it was once Phoenix's room, and Automedon has taken on Phoenix's role as the king's retainer—leaning with his head halfway out the window. Sometimes he needs that, the fresh breeze on his face, the clean scent of salt water, to remind him he's not at Troy. There is nothing—nobody—dead or dying here.

He hears the knock on the door but doesn't answer. There's another knock.

"Come in," he calls, still keeping his head turned toward the ocean. He can't look away, or he'll forget where he is.

"I am sorry to disturb you so late, my boy, but it seems you aren't getting any sleep, either."



It's Peleus' voice. In the ten years they'd been gone, Peleus seems like he's aged thirty. His hair had some black in it when they left, now it's all gray.

Automedon's stomach has finally settled enough that he can look away from the sea without feeling like he's going to see a battleground instead of a bedroom. Peleus is closing the door behind himself, moving slowly. His old wound takes a lot out of him.

"May I sit with you?" he asks.

"Of course, my king."

Automedon expects him to take the chair, but he sits on the bed beside him instead. It's probably more comfortable. "There's no need to call me that," Peleus says, as he props his cane against the wall and the bed. He needs it anytime he walks, now. "It is far too late at night for formalities."

When Peleus turns his head to look at Automedon, he's struck by the color of his eyes. They gleam in the dark, reflecting the moonlight raining in through the window, like an animal's. Like Achilles'. Automedon swallows a hard knot in his throat. This man is so much like his son. It feels like the reverse of looking at Pyrrhus. Every characteristic of Achilles' that Peleus reflects is something calming, something gentle. Automedon remembers waking up in the middle of the night, looking at these eyes, and knowing he was safe.

"You know," Peleus says, his voice quavering in a way that speaks of age but also of emotion. "Sometimes, I dream that a boat comes from Troy. And you are on it, alongside Achilles and Patroclus and Phoenix. Achilles has an arm around that incorrigible boy of his, and Phoenix comes to embrace me and I have my love and my boys returned to me."

Automedon tips his head back. He can still feel the breeze from here. He can't quite close his eyes—it's dangerous. The things that lie behind them haunt him. "That sounds lovely, right about until you wake up."

"Precisely." Peleus sighs, a ragged rush of air. "Automedon, you are the only one who lost them like I did. And even then I think you had it worse."

"I can't compare tragedies." Automedon knew of Achilles' destiny. To love Achilles was to prepare yourself for a tragedy. "But it was... awful. To watch them go."

"My poor boy. I tried to get Menesthios to tell me how bad it was. He was just happy to return to his mother, and to put Achilles and Patroclus behind him. They were never very close, Achilles and his nephew." Peleus sets a hand on Automedon's knee, running it up and down over the blanket he has tossed across his lap. "He told me I wouldn't want to know how Phoenix died."

He wouldn't. It is a horror to watch a man die in battle. It is a thousand horrors to watch a man be ravaged by the diseases after. "I... don't know what to say. My words leave me completely, sometimes." He understands how Achilles felt after Antilochus died, his voice stamped out of him. Automedon forces himself through it, often stammering like a child, because he doesn't want anyone to have the burden of caring for him the way he had to care for Achilles.

"It's all right," Peleus says. "You don't have to speak. You don't have to tell me. Everything you saw out there... It's too much, isn't it? It's too much. One man's soul shouldn't be meant to contain so much grief. I know what it is like. Long before... it feels like a different lifetime."

He doesn't know much about the king's history, but Peleus has the look in his eye of somebody who has lost just as much as Automedon has, and like grief has followed him for most of his life. Automedon swallows, sniffs, turns his head so that his face meets the breeze again. He can feel himself starting to cry and he wishes he could plunge a knife into his belly and pull these feelings out of his gut.

"Come here." Peleus is facing him, has his arms open. "Let me hold onto you for a little while. It will comfort me, too."

Peleus sits against the head of Automedon's bed and lets Automedon lay between his legs, with his head on his king's chest. It should be undignified. Automedon is a man of close to forty, now, and he's being treated like a child by a man he ought to bow to. But he can't tear himself from this comfort. He feels Peleus' heart beat. It's strong, even, not like when Phoenix's started slowing as the infection poisoned his body, waking Automedon up panicked and so, so aware of what was about to come.

How long has it been since he's held somebody and not had to think about what he needs to do to keep them alive?

It's such a relief he finds himself sobbing. He's not sad, aside from the way in which he's always sad in some part of himself. But there's a strange, sick joy in knowing there's a person out there, who feels exactly what he feels, all the horrible and nasty parts of it, and that person can hold him, and if he feels an ounce of pity for Automedon it is only because he pities himself. He doesn't have to be anything but his own horribly broken, anguished self in Peleus' arms. He doesn't have to be strong anymore. Doesn't have to hold anybody together, not even himself.

He's not sure how long they sit like that. He knows Peleus is crying, too. He's quieter about it, almost contemplative, but Automedon can feel tears falling into his hair. His hands are still steady and firm despite his age, stroking up and down Automedon's shoulders and his back. He sort of smells like Achilles, something sharp and unnatural amid all the warmth of his scent.

When Automedon can finally even his voice enough to speak, all he says is, "they're buried together," because he's not sure if anybody's told Peleus, even after these years. "Achilles and Patroclus. Antilochus, too, but you've never met."

Peleus takes a long time to reply. "I am so glad they are together. They would not be separated at all as children. We used it as the most serious punishment, they would cry if you put them in two different rooms." His laughter is a little bit wet. "I'm sorry I never had a chance to meet Antilochus."

"You would like him," Automedon said. "That's not to presume what you would like. Everyone likes Antilochus—liked."

"Tell me how they met him?" Peleus doesn't sound quite sure, and maybe Automedon seems like he doesn't want to talk.

"Oh—that's a funny story, actually. Patroclus brought him around one night, and then Achilles showed up, looking like, well, Achilles." Automedon could remember it perfectly, the way Achilles always made every movement elegant, how every eye turned to him. "I swear, Antilochus had stars in his eyes from the moment he saw him. Then, Achilles sat down and started cursing Agamemnon for all he was worth. He's got a filthy mouth."

"Can't imagine where he got that from." Peleus doesn't remark about the fact that Automedon sometimes talks like Achilles is just around the corner. Sometimes, people cringe when he does that, like they worry he's living in the past. Peleus lets him do it.

"Well, even after that, Antilochus was still starry-eyed. So you know he was in deep already. They went to bed, all three of them, and not a moment later, somebody from Nestor's camp shows up asking that we return his son, because Nestor doesn't have anybody to lecture. Poor man had to leave, dragged away by his father's runner."

Peleus' laugh rumbles through his chest the same way Achilles does. It's a little like a purr. By all accounts, the similarities between Achilles and his father should put Automedon off, like the similarities between Achilles and his son, but it doesn't. Automedon's just curious. He wants to know what added up to this man waking from a wonderful dream turned nightmare and coming, of all places, to Automedon's room.

"My boy could get into a fight with a tree stump," Peleus says.

"I know." Automedon remembers several dozen squabbles with Odysseus over seemingly nothing. Then, he says, "tell me how you met Phoenix." He has heard Phoenix give his account of the tale, but he's interested to hear Peleus' version.

"Oh!" Peleus brightens immediately, squeezing him a little tighter in his excitement. "Now *that* is a story." The way he speaks, with a sort of purposeful grandiosity, is less like Achilles and more like Patroclus. For all Patroclus hails from Opus, he was clearly raised by this man. "It will take some time to tell. Are you sure you do not want to get some rest? It is late, my dear boy."

"No, I do not sleep well at all. Unless you would rather return to bed."

"Heavens, no, I might have something so unfortunate as a good dream," Peleus says. "No, I think I will tell you. So, when I met Phoenix, he had been cursed, did you know? Achilles was probably only a few months old, back then..."

He tells the story until late night becomes early morning. Dawn sweeps the sky before he recounts the first time Phoenix actually saw him, the way his eyes cleared. Automedon marks this as the point, when Phoenix tells the story, at which Phoenix first fell in love with Peleus. He'd never said it outright but you could tell.

Peleus says, without a second of couching, "I knew at that moment I wanted him by my side for as long as I could have him."

He pauses for a long time.

"I want you by my side for as long as you like, too."

Automedon doesn't quite know what to say to that. "I am a messy person to keep around," is what comes out, even though he very desperately wants to do anything more than just existing as an empty vessel described entirely by what he lost.

"I know. But I cannot help the kinship I feel with you. It is something I feel I ought to share with, oh, my grandson, perhaps. But he never knew them the way I did. The way you do. As family, real family."

"Then I will stay by your side," Automedon says. When one pledged his loyalty to a king, he was supposed to be kneeling. Automedon has his cheek

sort of smashed against that king's chest, and it's making his voice muffled.  
"As long as I can."

"Good. Now, if you don't mind."

"Hm?"

"I'm going to sleep."

"Oh." Automedon tries to find it in himself to stir, and cannot. "Should I let you go?"

"No, not at all. Stay right where you are at." Peleus held him a bit tighter, as if he may attempt to get up. "It is a rare luxury to sleep and know that if I wake in any sort of upset, there will be someone here." He says it blithely, but it betrays how he is used to waking up afraid and alone. Automedon wondered how often Peleus slept badly over the past eleven years.

He can't even say how much he feels the same. All he says is, "alright," and closes his eyes.

When he dreams, it is not of loss. It is not of love. It is just him, sitting on a beach, listening to the waves. In his dream, the waves have a steady heartbeat.

### **Author's Note:**

Find me on Twitter where I'm usually talking about a MUCH happier book I'm writing about the Trojan war [@luddlestons!](#)

Thanks to Icky always for such wonderful Trojan War boys discussions! If you want some pre-war Peleus/Phoenix being sweet and in love, they have a wonderful fic [here!](#)